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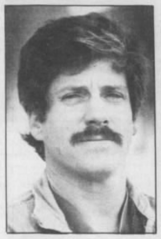
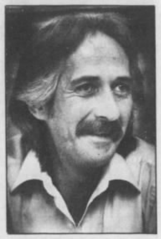
Profile of a Teamster union dissident



'Changes have to be made, and they're not going to come from the top. The rank and file have to take back control of this union.'

– David Robbins



'I just want to pump some new blood into the theory that there's some democracy in the Teamsters.'

– Dennis Nagle

■ TEAMSTERS

Continued from Page A1

ly 44,000 Teamsters. As recently as four years ago they ceased to exist entirely in Boston area unions.

But today, the reform movement in the Teamsters is drawing new attention: The US Justice Department is pressing its suit to oust Teamster international leaders on corruption charges, while recent national contracts negotiated by those leaders have run into unprecedented opposition from rank-and-file workers.

Nationwide, the TDU movement has about 10,000 members out of 1.7 million Teamsters. In this area, Teamster reformers say their ranks have gone from about a dozen to about 200 members – most signed up within the last several years.

New leaders have emerged: Joseph Day, a soft-spoken Teamster car hauler from Framingham; Rick Clark, a freight driver from Brockton; and Dennis Nagle, a Star Market warehouse worker and union steward from Attleboro who is challenging McCarthy for the presidency of his home local, the 7,000-member Local 25 in Charlestown.

Few believe Nagle will unseat McCarthy at Local 25. "I just want to pump some new blood into the theory that there's some democracy in the Teamsters," Nagle himself says.

What many of the new reformers hope is that McCarthy, pressured from within by dissension and from without by the Justice Department, will clean up the union and accede to major changes in contracts votes and other election reform.

David Robbins doubts meaningful reforms will come voluntarily.

Teamster activists in New England locals have faced constant intimidation and threats in the past, he notes. Some have lost jobs. A least one – Doty – has been beaten and hospitalized.

"People are afraid to speak up in this union. They're afraid of losing their jobs, and they're afraid of getting hurt," agrees a Teamster driver for the United Parcel Service in Boston, who has not joined TDU. "Most of us have given up the idea of reforming the Teamsters from within."

Says Robbins: "There's a lot of talk among the rank and file about how the union's falling apart. But when you go to a meeting and stand up, you are often alone."

□

It is a Friday afternoon and Robbins is in the cab of a Mack truck on the Southeast Expressway in a light rain. He is heading to Braintree to drop off an empty trailer at the end of a 10-hour day.

Robbins likes his work, a $12.77-an-hour job driving for Lindenmeyr Paper in Canton. "Driving is just something I got into young and found I enjoyed," he says.

What he doesn't like, he adds, is corruption found widely in the national union, and what he charges is the authoritative one-man rule of New England Council 10 under McCarthy.

Despite such criticism, Robbins insists the Teamsters union is needed today more than ever to fight employees in the trucking industry. "A worker today has to fight for their job every day, every minute," Robbins insisted.

Like many drivers, Robbins doesn't fit the image of an activist in the rough-and-tumble world of the Teamsters. He is a quiet, articulate man with an easy smile and a quick wit. He is also recording secretary and shop steward in Teamster Local 504 – a small 350-member unit in Boston that is considered one of the more openly run in the region.

But Robbins has been a Teamster activist nearly as long as he's been a driver. It didn't take long in the Teamsters, he insists, to become outraged.

Robbins began driving as a Teamster in the mid-1970s, working out of locals in Connecticut and New York. "It just looked wrong. The lifestyle of the union officials just seemed to not be that of the people they were representing," he says.

In Local 443 in New Haven, he found, union business agents were driving around in union-paid Cadillacs, wearing expensively tailored suits and expensive jewelry. The job of Teamsters in his unit, meanwhile, was hauling fuel oil and involved long hours in the winter and layoffs and part-time work as "spare" freight drivers in the summer.

Soon after arriving, Robbins said, he found none of the drivers were getting the overtime called for in the union contract. Robbins wasn't being paid it either, and called the union business agent. "He told me, 'You're walking on egg shells.'"

He fought and eventually got the contract pay rate, he said, but ran into a similar situation at another local where he drove a cement truck. "You had this sense there were all these special deals going on, and the union leadership was part of it."

In 1978, Robbins moved to Boston, began working under the jurisdiction of Local 42 on the North Shore, and for the first time met TDU activists. Arthur Doty, a former Marine combat veteran in Vietnam, was pushing reform slates as a union steward in Local 829. Frank Salemme, an early convert to TDU, was running for president of Local 42.

Impressed, Robbins went to a meeting of the Boston reformers in Salemme's cellar and was introduced to other like-minded Teamsters – David Wolfinson, who founded the Boston movement, and Jerome Crowley, a furniture mover from Local 82 going to college at Suffolk University but intent on staying in the Teamsters.

"Everybody talked and we felt the same. The average Teamster just wasn't being represented. The union had a terrible reputation. If we could only open up the union, maybe something would happen," he said.

□

Under McCarthy, dissidents in the Massachusetts locals didn't have the problems that dissidents had run into in other areas of the country, Robbins and other TDU members felt. Here, the issue wasn't that the union was "mobbed up" as in New York, New Jersey and in Midwest cities such as Cleveland and Detroit. Nor, TDU members agree, were there open threats or violence against union critics.

But it wasn't long before that view changed.

In December 1979, the doorbell rang on Robbins apartment in Somerville. When he opened it, he found Arthur Doty badly beaten and barely conscious. "You need help," Robbins told him, and took him to Cambridge Hospital, where he spent more than a week.

Continued on next page

He's a Teamster no more

■ DOTY

Continued from Page A1

one of the group's most promising leaders and was driven from the Teamsters because of it. Numerous times he had been elected to represent local bargaining units, they note.

"People in the union can't believe what was done to Arthur," said Teamster driver and TDU member David Robbins. "Arthur is not a radical. He's just a good union man."

Doty joined the Teamsters in 1969 when he took a job at a Somerville warehouse in the jurisdiction of Local 829. Many of his coworkers were also veterans, he said, and formed a group in the unit that began lobbying more open reporting of union business.

"The attitude of the Teamsters toward the rank and file is, 'You don't need to know that.' But we weren't about to accept that," Doty maintained. He and coworkers pushed for better financial reporting and changes in contract procedures that Doty maintains marked them as a radical bargaining unit.

Over the next 10 years, Doty was elected twice to job steward of the unit and twice to the local's wage committee. Often, he found himself at odds with Teamster officials, including McCarthy.

In 1975, Doty said, he and other members of the bargaining committee at the warehouse openly opposed a new contract supported by McCarthy.

Doty said his relations became even further strained in 1977, when he joined the newly founded Teamsters for a Democratic Union and when he worked with groups in both Local 25 and Local 829 to rewrite the union's bylaws.

The efforts eventually failed, the Teamster activist conceded, and he says ended with him being blacklisted by top Teamster officials. From 1979 to 1980, Doty was employed at Canada Dry under the jurisdiction of McCarthy's Local 25, but couldn't transfer into the local.

"I filled out an application, I wrote letters, I called. They just wouldn't accept me," Doty said. In October 1979, Doty was fired from the job. Mark Stern, an attorney who works with TDU members in Boston, said he called Canada Dry on Doty's behalf and was told the union had ordered him fired because he wasn't in Local 25.

Stern got Doty rehired immediately, but he never got into Local 25.

McCarthy said last week Doty would have gotten into Local 25 if he had stayed in the jurisdiction long enough. "He quit the job," McCarthy said.

But supporters note that Doty didn't quit until he had tried for nearly a year to get union membership in Local 25, a move that both Doty and Robbins said should have been accomplished almost immediately.

While he fought to get into McCarthy's local, Doty was knocked down a flight of 14 stairs and then kicked through a door during an union election in a sister local.

The attack occurred as he passed out literature for a TDU candidate, Lawrence Hice, who was running for the executive board of Local 829. For many in the Teamster dissident movement, the attack chilled criticism. For Doty, they say, it signaled the start of still more problems.

Despite finding new work, Doty struggled to get into Local 49, and after that Local 42 – finally winning the right only on appeal to Joint Council 10 and the international executive board of the Teamsters.

Still, his problems continued. In 1985, after being admitted to Local 42, he won election as a union steward at Hansen Engineering. Almost immediately, union officials replaced him with a former steward who had not run for the post.

Despite protests from Hansen workers, Doty wasn't given the post back. Later laid off, Doty hunted for work with the Teamsters but found none.

Today, with a civil suit pending against Teamster officials in US District Court in Boston, Doty says he has given up trying to get back into the union.

"I'm just sick and tired of people asking why the Teamsters don't do something about their union," he said. "I tried."

– BRUCE BUTTERFIELD

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